

Hallyu 3.0 in the Islamic World

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ABSTRACT: While the global expansion of the Korean Wave (Hallyu 3.0) has achieved significant momentum, the socio-religious friction it generates within the Islamic world remains under-researched. This study examines the patterns of Hallyu reception and the formation of anti-Hallyu sentiment in Southeast Asian Islamic societies, specifically focusing on Indonesia and Malaysia. Utilizing a qualitative thematic analysis of digital discourse on the social media platform Reddit, the research identifies key friction points where South Korean cultural content intersects with Islamic norms. The findings reveal three primary themes of resistance: (1) cultural negotiation, where consumption is moderated by conservative boundaries; (2) conflicts over gender role norms, particularly the rejection of non-traditional masculinity in male idols; and (3) theological concerns regarding music and "idolatry" (haram). The analysis suggests that anti-Hallyu sentiment in this region is a form of socio-cultural negotiation rather than political animosity.

KEYWORDS : Hallyu, Korean Wave, Anti-Hallyu, K-pop, Islamic Socio-cultural Values, Thematic Analysis

I. INTRODUCTION

The Hallyu phenomenon, also known as the Korean Wave, originated in the late 1990s through the exportation of South Korean television dramas to neighboring East Asian countries. More recently, the Hallyu has evolved into a comprehensive cultural ecosystem, which now encompasses K-pop, cinema, fashion, cuisine, and the Korean language, establishing itself as a global cultural phenomenon [1]. While the initial flow of Hallyu was largely confined to East Asia, the relationship between Korea and recipient nations is mediated a range of complex factors. In particular, the reception of Hallyu in Southeast Asian Islamic nations, including Indonesia and Malaysia, exhibits distinct patterns compared to East Asian counterparts such as China and Japan [1]. These regions offer unique case studies within the fields of cultural globalization and the sociology of religion.

Indonesia and Malaysia are characterized by multi-ethnic, multilingual, and multi-religious social structures, while simultaneously hosting the world's largest Muslim populations [2]. In these nations, Hallyu enjoys significant popularity among youth and female demographics; however, this trend is accompanied by growing social backlash stemming from concerns over the erosion of local cultural identity due to the rapid influx of foreign media. Previous studies have noted that certain segments of Muslim society have seen government-led interventions aimed at regulating the influence of Hallyu [3]. Consequently, in Islamic nations, Hallyu is filtered through a multifaceted lens of religious norms, national ideologies, and local cultural values [4].

According to the 2024 Overseas Hallyu Research Report published by the Korean Foundation for International Cultural Exchange (KOFICE), general favorability toward Korean cultural content in 2023 remained high in Indonesia (86.3%) and Malaysia (80.1%). However, the proportion of respondents reporting negative perceptions of Hallyu also reached 35.7% and 45.8%, respectively. Notably, in the Indonesian context, this negative sentiment has increased significantly from 16.5% in 2016. These findings suggest that the expansion of Hallyu is being met with a commensurate rise in "anti-Hallyu" sentiment. The primary reason for negative perceptions of Korean culture in Islamic countries is the belief that the content is "excessively provocative and sensational" [5]. This perception implies a prevailing view of Korean culture as being in conflict with Islamic religious values. Thus, unlike the political frictions observed in Japan and China, Anti-Hallyu sentiment in Southeast Asian Islamic nations is rooted in socio-cultural tensions [6]. Despite these developments, existing research on Anti-Hallyu has focused predominantly on cases in China and Japan, leaving a significant scholarly gap regarding the reception and perception of Hallyu in Islamic contexts.

Therefore, this study aims to investigate the consequences, implications, and opportunities related to the sustainability and diversity of the Hallyu phenomenon in Southeast Asian Islamic nations. The research focuses on socio-culturally constructed "anti-Korean" sentiments, centered on the cultural conflicts that arise during the reception of foreign culture. Given that the discourse surrounding Hallyu is primarily conducted

online, this study utilizes social media analysis to examine the formation and diffusion of both fandom-led and anti-Hallyu discourses.

II. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

1. The Evolution of Hallyu

Hallyu, or the Korean Wave, refers to the socio-cultural phenomenon through which Korean popular culture gains international popularity and influences global lifestyles. Originating in China and Japan in the late 1990s, the trend of South Korean cultural content has progressively expanded across Asia and into the global market [7]. The diffusion of Hallyu is intrinsically linked to transnational shifts, including developments in international relations, economic exchange, new media, increased cultural consumption, and the migration of human resources, alongside with South Korea's economic openness and cultural receptivity. According to Jin [8], the evolution of Hallyu can be categorized into three distinct stages based on period, geographic reach, genre, and dominant media platforms.

The first stage, termed Hallyu 1.0, began around 1997 and lasted until the mid-2000s. This initial wave was primarily a regional phenomenon, with its influence concentrated in East Asian markets, specifically China and Japan, owing to geographical and cultural proximity. The primary cultural exports during this period were television dramas and films, distributed through traditional broadcast media. Consumption patterns were largely passive, characterized by a unidirectional flow of content from Korean producers to overseas broadcasters and their audiences [1].

Hallyu 2.0, the second stage, emerged in the mid-2000s and represented a significant expansion in both content variety and geographic scope. While dramas maintained their popularity, K-pop emerged as a primary driver of the Korean Wave, capturing the attention of younger demographics. Geographically, Hallyu's influence extended beyond East Asia to Southeast Asia, Central Asia, North America, and Europe; this expansion laid the groundwork for its reception in Muslim-majority countries such as Indonesia and Malaysia. The most notable development during this period was the shift in media platforms. The rise of the internet, particularly video streaming services like YouTube and various social media platforms, transformed modes of fan engagement. Consumption transitioned into a more active and participatory model, as fans formed online communities to share, consume, and reinterpret cultural content directly [8].

Hallyu 3.0, spanning from the mid-2010s to the present, is characterized by a heightened global awareness of Korean culture in its entirety, built upon established economic and cultural influence. A defining feature of Hallyu 3.0 is the diversification of cultural genres beyond K-pop and dramas to include webtoons, fashion, cosmetics, cuisine, video games, and the performing arts. Advances in mobile technology have further accelerated this global diffusion and deepened fan engagement. This digital infrastructure serves as a core component of Hallyu 3.0, facilitating a decentralized cultural flow that enables reception across diverse socio-cultural contexts [9].

2. Hallyu and the Islamic World

The globalization of Hallyu 3.0 has facilitated entry into the Islamic world, a vast and dynamic market. With a Muslim population of approximately 1.8 billion, this region has become increasingly integrated into global media flows, positioning the Islamic world as a market with substantial potential for the Korean cultural industries [10]. This strategic significance is particularly salient when contrasted with traditional East Asian markets such as China and Japan, where political tensions and historical conflicts have at times generated anti-Hallyu sentiment [1]. The expansion of Hallyu into Muslim-majority regions began in the mid-2000s in Southeast Asian countries such as Indonesia and Malaysia and subsequently extended to Central Asia, the Middle East, and North Africa, with Iran, Turkey, and Egypt emerging as major recipient countries [10]. This diffusion was enabled by the defining characteristics of Hallyu 3.0, which are grounded in digital infrastructure and allow cultural content to be consumed beyond geographical and cultural boundaries.

According to the 2023 KOFICE report, Malaysia recorded a Hallyu Sentiment Index of 129.75 in 2022, placing it at the top of the "Intermediate Growth Group" [11]. This was the second-highest score among the six surveyed countries, following Indonesia (132.53), which is categorized within the "High Growth Group." As the Hallyu phenomenon has persisted in Indonesia for approximately two decades, academic research on the subject has become exceptionally robust. The impact is so significant that the phrase "the Korean Wave's invasion of Indonesia" has been employed to describe its extensive socio-cultural ripple effects.

However, the successful proliferation of Hallyu is accompanied by a corresponding degree of animosity. The surge of devoted "super-fans" has triggered a backlash among older generations, driven by cultural nationalism and a desire to safeguard national identity [12]. Furthermore, as K-pop is a product of a secular capitalist society, it promotes values such as commercialism, specific expressions of sexuality and gender, and the collective idolization of celebrities. These elements often clash with conservative Islamic norms, representing a significant cultural-value gap between Islamic belief systems and global Hallyu content [13], [14]. Nevertheless, the enthusiastic reception of such content in Islamic countries cannot be reduced to a simple

matter of acceptance. Rather, it reflects a complex process of cultural interaction and ongoing negotiation between conflicting value systems [15].

In a recent study, Mulya [13] analyzed the strategies adopted by Indonesian Muslim K-pop fans to negotiate the intersection of their faith and fandom. The first is the Opposition Strategy, the most common approach, wherein fans believe that being a Muslim fan is acceptable as long as they avoid specific aspects of K-pop culture that contravene Islamic values, such as immodest attire. The second is the Irrelevance Strategy; fans adopting this stance view faith and fandom as two distinct spheres of life that do not influence one another. They consume K-pop purely as entertainment, devoid of religious scrutiny. The author argues that this position may constitute a form of "quiet resistance," where fans assert independent interpretations of their faith against more authoritative religious teachings. Finally, the Identity Fusion Strategy emphasizes similarities and interconnections between Islam and K-pop. For these fans, being a fan can contribute to being a better Muslim and vice versa. They perceive shared values, such as cleanliness and mutual respect, and view both religion and K-pop as sources of healing in their daily lives.

3. Anti-Hallyu

The anti-Hallyu phenomenon is characterized by a spectrum of negative sentiment and behaviors, ranging from defensive vigilance against cultural hegemony to overt rejection and hatred [16], [17]. These reactions are often triggered not only by negative issues regarding cultural content but also by internal value systems and social tensions within the recipient nation [17]. Kim [16] defines anti-Hallyu through negative cognitions and behaviors, such as overt hatred or rejection. Its primary drivers include the unilateral diffusion of content without cross-cultural understanding, the perceived closedness of the Korean cultural industry, protectionism of local culture, and fluctuating political-social relations between Korea and the host country.

Prior research on anti-Hallyu focused predominantly on Japan and China, where sentiments are fueled by diplomatic disputes and historical nationalism [18]. However, studies on Southeast Asian anti-Hallyu remain comparatively limited. In the context of Muslim-majority nations like Indonesia, the friction points are distinct. According to Kim et al., anti-Hallyu attitudes in Indonesia emerge from three specific conflicts: the clash between K-pop's secular nature and Islamic religious values, the rise of discourse surrounding the protection of local cultural identity, and a shift in animosity from the content itself toward the obsessive behavior of highly devoted local fans [18]. This suggests that Southeast Asian resistance is rooted more in socio-religious negotiation than in the geopolitical tensions seen in East Asia.

Building on this body of prior research, the present study examines patterns of Hallyu reception as well as anti-Hallyu sentiments in Southeast Asian Muslim-majority countries, where the Korean Wave has experienced rapid growth and increasing popularization. In particular, the study focuses on socially and culturally constructed forms of anti-Korean sentiment. Given that discourse surrounding Hallyu is conducted predominantly on social media platforms, this research investigates anti-Hallyu discourses as they emerge and circulate in online spaces.

III. METHODS

1. Data Collection

To examine perceptions and reception of Hallyu within Muslim societies in Southeast Asia, this study collected posts from the social media platform Reddit and conducted a thematic analysis. Reddit is a web-based platform organized into topic-specific discussion forums known as subreddits, which encompass a wide range of subject areas, including politics, humor, religion, health, academic discourse, news, and other interests [19]. (Soliman et al., 2019). Among them is a subreddit devoted exclusively to discussing Islamic beliefs, where users anonymously post content and engage in discussions through comments. For the purpose of this study, only posts containing the keywords "Indonesia," "Malaysia," and "K-pop" were included in the analysis. Among the posts related to K-pop, the threads with the highest number of views were selected and collected on May 11, 2025. In total, 35 posts and their comments were included in the analysis.

2. Data Analysis

Thematic analysis is a qualitative analytic method used to identify, analyze, and interpret recurring themes within a dataset. This study adopts thematic analysis as a qualitative analytic method used to identify, analyze, and interpret recurring themes within a dataset [20]. In qualitative research, this process involves close attention to salient phrases and keywords, grouping these elements into analytically meaningful categories, and deriving overarching themes from these groupings.

IV. RESULTS

To examine the patterns of anti-Hallyu attitudes within Islamic societies, online discourses were analyzed. The findings were categorized into three primary themes: (1) Cultural Negotiation and Boundary

Setting; (2) Conflict with Gender Role Norms; and (3) Idolatry and Religious Conflict. These themes are detailed below.

1. Cultural Negotiation and Boundary Setting

This perspective posits that K-pop is acceptable as a mainstream culture only if it respects the boundaries established by conservative Islamic values. This aligns with the "Opposition Strategy" identified in Mulya's [13] research regarding Hallyu reception strategies.

"Malaysia is one of the most moderate Muslim countries; being a fan of K-pop or K-dramas is not an issue as long as there is only viewing and no physical contact. However, the incident where B1A4 members hugged female Muslim fans sparked significant controversy." (Mo****)

"K-pop groups' revealing outfits and provocative choreography conflict with Islamic practices, remaining subjects of criticism and aversion among conservative Muslims." (92****)

While K-pop is widely consumed, it clearly encounters the ethical limitations of Islamic conservatism when it involves physical intimacy or overt sensationalism.

2. Conflict with Gender Role Norms

This theme highlights critical viewpoints regarding the appearance and behavior of male K-pop idols, which often deviate from traditional perceptions of masculinity.

"Male K-pop idols often wear makeup and maintain an appearance distant from the typical male image." (Mo****)

"Many people dislike K-pop because they perceive it as childish or 'gay'." (wh****)

"It is undesirable to see 'feminine' men running around on stage and singing in high-pitched voices." (mu****)

Male idols are criticized for not being "macho" or for appearing "effeminate" or "gay," which is perceived as a violation of the gender roles established within Islamic society.

3. Idolatry and Religious Conflict

The most prominent term in online Islamic discourse regarding Hallyu is haram (forbidden). From this viewpoint, music itself is considered haram, and the idolization of celebrities is seen as a violation of the core Islamic principle that no idols should be placed beside Allah.

"According to the Quran, music is forbidden, and it is right to stay away from it." (mu****)

"One must not worship any idol besides Allah; therefore, the worship of 'idols' becomes problematic." (Gr****)

"In Islam, hanging pictures of people is discouraged, so putting posters on a wall can be an issue." (sw****)

Strict religious interpretations serve as a primary source of cultural conflict by negating the fundamental elements of K-pop fandom: the consumption of music and the "idolization" of performers.

V. CONCLUSION

The findings of this study demonstrate that the reception of Hallyu in Southeast Asian Islamic societies is not a passive adoption of foreign culture, but rather a complex process of negotiation mediated by religious and traditional values. While previous literature on anti-Hallyu sentiment in China and Japan emphasizes geopolitical and historical frictions, this study highlights that resistance in Indonesia and Malaysia is primarily socio-religious [1]. The current study reveals that the Hallyu phenomenon in Southeast Asian Islamic nations is characterized by a dualistic nature: widespread, positive cultural reception exists alongside deep-seated tensions regarding religious and ethical values. This friction primarily arises when Hallyu content intersects, and at times conflicts, with traditional social values, gender norms, and strict religious doctrines within Islamic societies.

This study contributes to the field of cultural globalization by providing empirical evidence of how Hallyu is received in non-East Asian contexts. The transition to Hallyu 3.0, driven by decentralized social media platforms, has allowed for a more democratic, but also more contentious, cultural flow [8]. In Islamic Southeast Asia, the anti-Hallyu sentiment is not a sign of the wave's decline, but rather an indicator of its deep integration into the social fabric, necessitating a response from traditional and religious authorities. Consequently, these findings suggest that when formulating strategies for the global expansion of Hallyu content, it is imperative to maintain a high degree of sensitivity toward local cultural and religious contexts. Furthermore, future research should engage in in-depth explorations of the variations in reception among diverse sub-groups within Islamic societies to facilitate a more systematic understanding of anti-Hallyu discourse.

Despite the insights gained from this study, several limitations must be acknowledged. First, the current study relied exclusively on Reddit, specifically the r/Islam subreddit. While Reddit provides a unique space for anonymous and candid discussion, its user base is predominantly English-speaking and often represents a Western-centric or diaspora-based Muslim perspective. This demographic profile may not fully capture the linguistic and localized nuances of anti-Hallyu sentiments expressed in native languages such as Bahasa Indonesia. Second, this study analyzed a limited sample size of high-traffic posts. While thematic saturation was achieved within the selected dataset, the narrow volume of posts may not account for the full spectrum of evolving opinions or fringe discourses. Future research should adopt a multi-platform approach by incorporating data from Instagram, YouTube, and TikTok, which are the primary drivers of Hallyu consumption and fan engagement in Southeast Asia.

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